

advantage of the holiday. The second bill will add school backpacks to the list of items that are eligible for a sales tax break. Backpacks are an essential item for our school children and adding them to the list will only benefit families and children.

### **Helping low income Texans cope with the rising cost of energy/System Benefit Fund Restoration - SB 169**

The System Benefit Fund was established by the Texas Legislature in 1999 to provide discounts to low-income and elderly Texans on their monthly utility bills and ease the burden of rising electricity rates. Unfortunately, funding for the program was cut significantly in 2003, and finally discontinued in 2005, so deserving Texans, despite the fact they were still paying taxes for the fund, were not getting the relief on their electric bills they needed.

This session the Legislature partially restored \$200 million in funding for the program that will reduce utility costs for low-income Texans by up to 20% during the summer months: \$30 million for July through September in 2007; \$80 million for May through September in 2008; and \$90 million for May through September in 2009. As a result, It is estimated that around 330,000 Texans will receive discounts of approximately 12% this summer.

In order to qualify for the discount, a household must have an income that does not exceed 125% of the federal poverty level (~\$26,000 for a family of 4). Individuals who receive certain benefits, such as Medicaid and TANF, are automatically enrolled.

### **Protecting our right to vote/ Staving off voter ID**

Like last session, I helped defeat plans to enact voter intimidation laws in Texas, so-called Voter ID efforts that are nothing more than Jim Crow, dressed up a bit for the 21st Century.



These bills would have made it much more difficult for elderly, low-income and minority Texans to vote. Under these provisions, voters would be required to show a voter registration card *and* picture identification or two forms on non-picture identification in order to vote. The fact of the matter is that those calling for these new laws cannot point to a single case of fraud where requiring an ID would have had an impact, but we have many studies showing that ID laws dramatically reduce turnout, especially for the elderly, African Americans and Hispanics.

I'm going to fight voter ID as long as I'm in office. We won't go back.

### **Building a more fair and Just Texas Criminal Justice System**

Reforming Texas criminal justice system to ensure fairness, justice, and safety for all Texans remains one of my top priorities, and we truly moved in the right direction this session.

### ***Protecting the Right to Counsel and Fairness on Juries - SB's 168, 560 and HB 1178:***

I authored a number of bills this session that will significantly improve fairness in our justice system. SB 168, SB 560, HB 1178, and an amendment to HB 1617 will significantly increase state funding (up \$9.6M/year) to counties to help improve the quality of legal representation for indigent defendants, protect the right to counsel, improve civil legal services for the poor, and improve fairness and diversity on Texas juries.

### ***Protecting Texans from Identity Theft - SB 222***

I authored SB 222 to protect Texas families from the growing problem of identity theft. Senate Bill 222 will allow a person to place a security freeze on their credit without the requirement of a police report. If a consumer is going to be responsible for cleaning



up their own credit they should have the tools to do so. A "freeze" can prevent imposters from getting new credit, loans, and services in their name and the freeze can be removed at any time by the consumer if they are unhappy with it. SB 222 will be particularly useful to consumers who have had their information exposed or are at high risk of having their information exposed.

***Increase compensation for the wrongfully convicted - SB 262*** I was able to add this bill as an amendment to HB 814. No amount of money can make up for the years wrongfully incarcerated individuals are forced to suffer, but the added resources from this legislation can, at the very least, help provide them with the necessities to begin putting their lives back together.

We also achieved success in moving the debate forward on a number of other criminal justice issues.

***Texas Substance Abuse Treatment and Crime Prevention Act - SB 1909:*** I am particularly proud of SB 1909, landmark legislation that would have given judges the ability to divert many nonviolent low-level drug possession offenders, with no serious criminal history, from costly prison stays to effective treatment programs. SB 1909 would have significantly enhanced public safety by reducing drug related crime and preserving jail and prison space for violent offenders, and saved Texas taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. The bill passed the Senate and House committees, through bipartisan cooperation, but, unfortunately, did not pass during the final days of session. I plan to build on the progress we made this session and work with my colleagues during the interim to pass this important legislation in the next legislative session.

***Texas Innocence Commission - SB 263*** This important legislation would have created an independent commission to